

Book Review: Aguilar Jr., Filomeno V., Migration Revolution: Philippine Nationhood and Class Relations in a Globalized Age

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Book Reviews

Aguilar Jr., Filomeno V. (2014), *Migration Revolution: Philippine Nationhood and Class Relations in a Globalized Age*

Singapore: NUS Press; Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press, (= Kyoto CSEAS Series on Asian Studies, 11), ISBN: 9-789971697-815, 312 pages

Philippine migration has long been studied and analysed through different lenses which take into account state or non-state imperatives that either push or bar the flow of migrants. Filomeno Aguilar's book provides historical narratives and an in-depth analysis of Filipino migration that reflects how class relations and class composition have been transformed over time, affecting migratory flows and trajectories. Sharing empirical evidence and the experiences of migrants, the book reveals past and contemporary paths of Filipino migration and how national identities have been reconfigured to adjust to the global setting. The essays reiterate that while migration processes have been situated in sociopolitical contexts that span Spanish colonisation, the infamous dictatorial government of Marcos, and the current migration regimes, the richness of Filipino migration culture lies in the subjectivities and nuances of migrants' construction of their identities in relation to the countries they belong to and imagine they belong to – either temporarily or permanently. In each of the chapters one sees the huge impact migration has had on all aspects of Philippine society and its huge contribution to the national identity. The description of migration as a revolutionary process is thus an apt one.

In Chapter One, Aguilar discusses the historical accounts of Filipino seafarers and gives readers a deep understanding of the country's migration history. The chapter emphasises that while changes in identity and class formation took place among the Manilamen seafarers who settled in the destination countries, they strongly identified with events in their motherland. Chapter Two looks into the transformation of class relations as globalisation ushered in a new platform for labour migration to flourish. Here Aguilar zeroes in mostly on paid domestic labour, a field which has grown exponentially for several decades and is still a popular migration project for Filipino women. In chapters three and four, he moves the discussion forward and shifts the focus to the subjective experiences of migrants, particularly the manifestations of shame in a transnational setting and the role of remittances in class relations.

Early in the book Aguilar warns the readers of the repetitive contentions and discussions because the book is a compilation of the many articles he wrote when he was a travelling scholar (p. 8). Whilst this statement is true, I believe these are necessary “repetitions” that serve as threads connecting the events to showcase a distinctly Filipino migration revolution. However, there are some historical references that are rather long and seem to obfuscate the particular chapter’s focal point and the milieu it could relevantly represent (p. 83). Some chapters have subsections that are repetitive and could be viewed as redundant (pp. 128 and 139).

In the early chapters Aguilar reveals how a migration crisis like the case of Flor Contemplacion on the one hand emboldens migrants’ Filipino identity in the destination countries and on the other hand, because of shame, has created an opposite sentiment among the elites and upper classes in the Philippines (pp. 114–117). This provides a very telling example of how class relations are the crux of national image formation for Filipinos who do not share the same national borders nor the same imaginings of their homeland. This raises the question of what values and whose sentiments are being prioritised and legitimised by the state apparatus. More importantly, we can ask why these standard images and ideas of Filipino-ness are being emphasised over others.

While the book also points out how skilled Filipinos in host countries have concealed their Filipino-ness to dissociate themselves from the low-skilled Filipino workers (p. 112; p. 189), a somewhat different scenario was presented to me in the more than 10 years that I conducted migration research in Singapore, Thailand, Japan, and (mostly) Hong Kong. In these countries, there are many Filipino professionals and residents who work hand in hand with the migrant community for various causes. Based on my observations, the presence of more than 120,000 Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong has never compromised the so-called “national image” woven by the privileged class back home, which is probably not as palpable as described in Aguilar’s book. It could be that the controversial migration crises that took place more than two decades ago have imprinted a strong sense of belonging that the diasporic community now appreciates. But that is just one side of the coin. It is not uncommon for female Filipino residents and professionals in host countries, particularly in Asia, to be stereotyped, not only by locals but also by Filipino domestic workers themselves, with skilled Filipino women labelled as either former domestic workers or prostitutes who were lucky enough to marry a foreigner. Ascribing Filipinos who have “made it” a low status rather than recognising their personal merits assuages the

feelings of resentment some migrant workers hold regarding the class mobility that has been refused to them in the host country.

Migration is highly prioritised in the development agenda of most developing countries because of its most visible indicator – remittances. Contemporary migration studies have shown that remittances are a means to intensify familial relationships and to assert one's authority within a household's political economy. Aguilar's book shows how migrant remittances are used as tools to operationalise and reinforce the transnationalisation of class relations. He provides a grounded and realistic view of how Filipino overseas remittances could reconfigure social structures and class relations across nation states. Remittances from overseas Filipinos continue to increase, rising from USD 12 billion in 2006 to USD 25 billion in 2016, and whilst remittances ensure upward social mobility in the homeland, they do not have the same effect in the host countries. This is a firm indication that class relations mediated by migrant remittances are best understood when we look at the frames of nation states. Migrants might be kings or queens back home, but acquiring residency or citizenship in destination countries is still an elusive dream.

The concerns of a transnation, citizenship, and Philippine nationhood take centre stage in chapters five, six, and seven. Aguilar describes how Filipinos are dealt with in various nation states, from Filipino immigrants in the US to temporary labour migrants in the tiger economies of Asia and the oil-rich states of the Middle East. Chapter Five challenges the existence and importance of a transnation in the preservation of Filipino identity. Aguilar positions his argument on the authenticity of Filipino identity in relation to the existence of a transnation. While transnational communities are tangible resources with which to maintain one's identity, understanding the authenticity of being Filipino as corresponding to the existence of a transnation is not always accurate or applicable to a Filipino cosmopolite. Aguilar deconstructs the concept of transnationalism and concludes that while transnational social ties and spaces do extend beyond borders, they are very subjective and vary in degree, depending on the relationships and interests being treasured (p. 178 onwards). One cannot apply the same lens of national belonging within each generation of migrants, nor would migrants make the same contribution to national narratives. Their personal experiences and the national borders within which they are located also need to be taken into consideration.

Chapter Six tackles the conduct of the host states regarding the exclusion or inclusion of migrants in the society, while Chapter Seven anal-

yses how the Philippine government reincorporates overseas Filipinos through absentee voting and dual citizenship. These last two chapters discuss in detail what “legitimises” the relative exclusion and inclusion of migrants. In the host states, Filipino professionals (after seven years of residency in the case of Hong Kong) are given a chance to acquire residency and eventually citizenship, and thus to maintain their social status in the community and participate in civil and political life. This is exactly what Marcos and Suharto did with rich migrants in the Philippines and Indonesia, respectively (p. 212). On the other hand, low-skilled Filipino temporary workers, who have stayed for decades in the host countries, are refused such status and thereby denied the chance of upward social mobility. Countries justify this as part of migration management and control under the basic premise of an “imagined community” protecting their citizenry. What is worse is the host governments’ appropriation of low-skilled labour by claiming migrant surpluses while excluding them in various respects: residency and citizenship status, minimum wage law, and access to credit and other financial resources. Aguilar perfectly captures Filipino migrancy in limbo, showing how temporary labour migrants have been unable to successfully assimilate in host countries (p. 217). What should be highlighted here is the host states’ instrumental approach to citizenship and belonging, something which is still prominent in many major migration regimes, particularly in rich Asian countries.

The final chapter reviews the Philippine state’s stance on incorporating migrant Filipinos through absentee voting and dual citizenship. The economic discourse and nationalist justifications are discussed in detail, together with arguments from those who oppose the reintegration of overseas Filipinos. At the time the book was written the political promise of the Filipino diaspora might have been impossible to realise (p. 240), but a different scenario is evident now. Whether it is due to social media or the advent of the Internet, overseas Filipinos have a more intense and engaged attitude than before, and they did deliver in the last presidential elections in 2016. While some view the reincorporation of immigrants as opportunistic, providing migrant Filipinos a platform to deliver their political and economic promises is a pivotal act on the part of the government to legitimise migrants’ inclusion in nation building.

Aguilar’s book is a good read for scholars who want to study temporary and regional labour migration, state structures, the divergent ways of incorporating migrants, and most importantly the transformation of a nation state brought about by migration and competitive class relations. Some of Aguilar’s concepts, arguments, and analysis on the different

facets of migration might not be very surprising for migration scholars as these are reflected in the studies and research literatures of various countries. What makes this book an invaluable contribution in the field of migration is the in-depth historical and reflexive research that empirically narrates how a migration regime has evolved and contributed to the construction of a national identity for one of the world's top remittance-receiving countries – the Philippines. The book raises critical questions, exposes counter-narratives from different sections of society, and pushes readers to understand migrants' subjective experiences in the formation of Filipino identity in the midst of powerful and opportunistic social structures in both the Philippines and the host states.

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